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ABSTRACT

A case study analyzed the dialogue in three student-professor dialogue journals written in conjunction with a content area reading course and its related field-based practicum. The three participating students one in English, one in social studies, and one in biology, were selected from a class of 14 students based on representation of predominant content majors in a teacher education program. A content analysis of the professor's responses to student journal entries was conducted. Results indicated that the professor responded to the students by extending their thoughts, complimenting them, and acknowledging their skills and talents. Findings suggest that the journals consisted of student entries and professor feedback, as opposed to establishing a forum for equal parties to engage in a meaningful and reciprocal dialogue. (One table of data is included.) (RS)

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THE OTHER HALF: A CASE STUDY OF ASYMMETRICAL COMMUNICATION IN CONTENT AREA READING STUDENT-PROFESSOR DIALOGUE JOURNALS

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Running Head: The Other Half

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Secondary content area preservice teachers enrolled in certification programs thoughout the country are encouraged by their mentors to become "reflective practitioners" (Schon, 1987). Preservice teachers are being asked to think of knowledge and pedagogy as sociocultural domains amenable to purposeful and critical analysis. Student-professor dialogue journals offer one vehicle for reflection on content area lessons. However, the degree to which open, reflective inquiry occurs is highly dependent on the communication context of the dialogue.

Miller (1990) viewed dialogue journals as emancipatory because they place the teacher in the role of teacher-as-reseacher with knowledge seen as socially constructed and open to question. Yet any dialogue, whether spoken or written, holds the potential for open or closed communication. Conversational dialogues involve a tacit contract between speaker and listener. This communication contract assumes that a speaker will strive to be understood by the other party and that the listener will actively seek meaning and signal the other party should communication break down (Grimes, 1975). Unfortunately, this conversational balancing act may not hold true in dialogues between parties occupying different sociocultural and hierarchical strata. Tannen (1990) questioned why some conversations floundered with two parties talking at cross-purposes. She used the term "symmetrical" to describe dialogues that result in mutual understanding and "asymmetrical" to denote dialogues that distance one party from the other. For example, when a teacher admonishes a student in a science lab to "follow the lab manual directions more carefully" after a botched experiment, this student is unlikely to ask for additional help.

The purpose of the present study was to conduct a case study analysis of the dialogue in three student-professor dialogue journals written in conjunction with a content area reading course and its related field-based practicum. The study was part of a larger investigation aimed at exploring dialogue journal communication across various stages of a teacher preparation program (Zulich, Bean, & Herrick, 1992).

Student-professor dialogue journals offer one route to reflective inquiry but how the dialogue is handled holds the key to whether or not they are truly helpful. For example, Miller (1990) wrote dialogue journals over a three year period with a small group of her graduate students who were experienced teachers. Although each member of Miller's project wanted to reduce the barriers to honest communication about the trials and triumphs of teaching, they each grappled with asymmetrical conversational problems. Miller reported that she struggled with her role as professor and originator of the invitation to engage in this long term dialogue. Her teacher colleagues expressed a similar anxiety about opening up in a dialogue journal with Miller, "our teacher."

Tannen's (1990) construct of symmetrical and asymmetrical conversations suggests that we simply having students in a content area reading class write to us does not assume open lines of communication about a preservice teacher's beliefs and practices. How we respond to students may encourage or inhibit reflective inquiry. The present study explored this issue through a content analysis of student-professor dialogue journals extracted from an earlier study that focused on a stage theory of preservice teacher development (Zulich, Bean, & Herrick, 1992). We applied Tannen's (1990) theory of conversational symmetry to discover the extent to which the content area reading professor's responses created a symmetrical dialogue.

Preservice Teacher Development

In a recent review of qualitative case studies of preservice teacher development, Kagan (1992) listed common themes that might increase the potential for asymmetrical dialogue journal exchanges. She noted that preservice teachers cling to a romanticized view of good teaching forged through years of personal experience in classrooms. Unfortunately, this idealized image may not be an appropriate model for today's classrooms. Indeed, Kagan found that students' preconceptions about teaching were unaffected by courses in education or field experiences. These preconceptions often resulted in the creation of a fuzzy model for teaching that assumed today's students were like yesterday's. Dialogue journals should challenge these limited assumptions. However, the critical stance that may be established through dialogue journals can be challenged

by at least four factors that interact to influence a preservice teacher's development. These include: (a) discipline subculture (O'Brien, 1988; Bean & Zulich, 1990); (b) the quality of preservice experience in the classroom (Livingston & Borko, 1989; Richardson, 1990); (c) opportunities for reflection on the preservice experience (Zulich, Bean, & Herrick, in press); and, (d) personal biography including many years experience as a student in classrooms (Britzman, 1991; Manna & Mischeff, 1987). Each of these factors plays a role in the status relationships and conversational style that develops in the dialogue journal exchange.

For example, the technical vocabulary of a discipline along with preferred theories about learning in a specialized field partially delimits the teaching and learning terrain. Students often align themselves with their respective discipline subcultures. The field experience assignment can serve as a forum for personal reflection but more often than not, preservice teachers align themselves with the structure of the school in a desire to fit in. Reflective activities such as dialogue journals may serve a critical, analytic function, if both parties treat the journal as a powerful means to problem-solving. Bennett (1991) found that autobiographical differences among preservice teachers resulted in contrasting approaches to classroom teaching. She concluded that reflective journals helped work through the fears and problems associated with becoming a teacher.

Although Miller's (1990) study and Bennett's research explored the use of dialogue journals in reflection on teaching, they did not probe the hierarchical status relationships that can interfere with communication in journal writing. The missing element in studies of student-professor dialogue journal communication in diverse content areas is a theoretical description of this process that shows the dialogue journal's potential for the critical exchange of ideas balanced by journal communication that falls short of this potential. Our research explored this contrast in a required content area reading course using Tannen's (1990) theoretical construct of symmetrical and asymmetrical conversations.

Method

Subjects

The subjects in this study included three students who submitted their journals for dialogue communication and the professor who responded to their journal entries. Subjects were selected based on representation of predominant content majors in the teacher education program. The present study focused on the professor's responses.

The course was comprised of 12 female and 2 male students representing the following disciplines: (a) 6 from social studies; (b) 1 from biology; (c) 1 from English; (d) 1 from Hawaiian Studies; (e) 1 from mathematics; and, (f) 4 elementary inservice teachers taking the course as an elective in their Professional Certificate program. Ethnic groups represented included Hawaiian, Caucasian, Japanese, Chinese, and Portuguese.

Pseudonyms were assigned as follows: Carolyn in English, Iwalani in social studies, and Marge in biology. Carolyn was a 39 year old Caucasian student, returning to complete teacher certification after a combined degree in French and English and a career teaching English style horseback riding and dressage. Iwalani was a 38 year old Chinese student raised in the Hawaiian community. She was a political science major who left the hotel industry to fulfill her teaching aspirations. She volunteered as a docent in a local ocean park educational center. Marge was a 42 year old Caucasian student from Louisiana with a major in biology. During the content area reading/writing course, Marge accepted two challenging part-time teaching positions as a G. E. D. instructor at the local prison and at the alternative learning center for at-risk high school students.

The three students in this case study were assigned to observation-participation field experiences two days per week for two hours each day at a Big Island suburban intermediate school enrolling over 900 students. Carolyn worked in a mixed seventh and eighth grade English class. Iwalani was in an 8th grade social studies class and Marge was assigned to a 7th grade science class.

The professor was a 42 year old Caucasian raised in Honolulu. He graduated from Punahou, a private school in Hawaii in 1965 and completed an undergraduate degree in English at the University of Hawaii. After teaching, conducting research, and becoming a full professor and Reading

Department Graduate Coordinator in the California State University system, he moved to the Big Island to serve as Education Department Chair in a small liberal arts institution of 3000 students. He was a co-author of the text used in the content area reading course which emphasized specific vocabulary and learning from text strategies (Readence, Bean, & Baldwin, 1992).

Materials and Procedures

Journal writing by students and the first author took place during the first 10 minutes of each class. The professor collected several voluntary journals each class session, offering his journal to a student reader. At the next class, students and the professor returned journals with their written responses to entries. The secondary content area reading/writing course met Monday nights from 4:30 to 7:00 with a two day practicum on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 8:00 to 10:00 a.m.

We conducted a content analysis of the professor's responses to student journal entries and constant comparison analysis for emerging patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). We repeatedly read all transcribed student journals focusing on professor responses and recorded this information on note cards. The three categories that emerged for the professor's responses were: (a) Extending Student Thoughts - responses that continue the student's discussion, often establishing a "private curriculum" by offering additional information or suggested readings; (b) Answering Questions - direct or indirect answers to student questions; and, Acknowledging Student's Skills and Talents - responses that recognize the student's specific talents, skills, or contributions.

Results

The course emphasized guiding student learning from text through various teaching strategies in vocabulary, comprehension, writing, and study strategies. The course introduced study guides, anticipation-reaction guides, graphic organizers and other strategies which help students cope with often unfriendly textbooks. The course's two day practicum provided prospective teachers classroom-based opportunities to practice these strategies with secondary students.

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Analysis of journal entries in this course indicated that as our students entered public school classrooms in their new teaching roles, they became focused on the specifics of developing effective lessons. They expressed interest in the use of vocabulary strategies and generally recognized the value of the course. In addition, they were aware of the importance of building effective relationships with their cooperating teachers. Although the practicum assignment launched these students into a fairly advanced stage of preservice teacher development focusing on lesson effectiveness, their journals revealed few comments concerning the students they were teaching. This attention to their own lesson design and lack of commentary on their students is fairly typical of novice teachers, (Kagan, 1992).

Professor responses to student journals encompassed the three categories of extending student thoughts, answering questions, and acknowledging student skills and talents. While professor responses in the categories of extending thoughts and complimenting were written to all three students, the category of answering questions applied to only one student and acknowleding skills was evident in responses to two students. Table 1 contains a summary of professor responses to the three students by category. Each of these responses is explored in greater detail in the following section.

Insert Table 1 About Here

Professor Responses To Iwalani's Journal

As evidenced in the pages of her journal, Iwalani's personal biography directly influenced her deep interest in group-oriented teaching strategies. Her life experiences in the Hawaiian community and her academic subculture in social studies supported the value of cooperation and group responsibility.

Iwalani's practicum placement with an outstanding junior high social studies teacher provided valuable opportunities to practice reading and writing strategies that involved small group work. Her journal offered a place to reflect on her ability to use these strategies in the classroom.

Responses to Iwalani's journal consisted of 3 extensions of her

thoughts for the 5 times she volunteered her journal for professor commentary. But these professor responses were often distant in tone in relation to her understandable nervousness about the practicum assignment. For example, when Iwalani expressed anxiety and uncertainty about her ensuing practicum, the professor wrote: "Actually, O/P (observation-participation) is still pretty friendly since you are under the wing of a mentor teacher. Most contemporary programs of teacher education reject the old sink or swim approach in favor of increasing amounts of responsibility. Teaching and becoming a teacher is viewed as a developmental process with discernible stages." Most of the professor's responses to Iwalani's journal comments took on this global stance intended to extend her thoughts about the practicum.

Professor Responses To Marge's Journal

Marge's journal displayed a good deal of self doubt and a philosophical view that was critical of the lecture mode of teaching and memorization often found in university biology classes. Once she became immersed in teaching with an excellent science mentor in the intermediate school near the university, much of her anxiety disappeared. Responses to Marge's journal entries spanned the three categories with four answers to questions, three acknowledgments, and three extensions for the four times she voluteered her journal. For example, the professor acknowledged her willingness to undertake challenging teaching assignments: "You bring a wide array of experiences to teaching--the prison work certainly provides a clear sense of how hard it is to go back and learn rudimentary basic skills."

Professor's Responses to Carolyn's Journal

As an English major, Carolyn quickly grasped the intent of the course and demonstrated a keen interest in using the strategies presented to create effective lessons. Her journals provided a potential forum for careful and critical self analysis of teaching. However, the professor's responses for the 3 times she volunteered her journal did not encourage an extended dialogue. Carolyn's detailed examination of specific content area reading strategies went virtually unattended throughout the journal. The professor's responses consisted of 1 extension and 1 acknowledgment. For example, he extended her thoughts on the philosophy of content area reading: "Reading texts is considerably more complex than we usually

realize...Teachers really form the link to obscure concepts locked away in the sometimes convoluted and unfriendly language of a textbook."

Discussion

On the surface, one might assume that dialogue journal conversations encourage a critical and careful analysis of teaching (Bean & Zulich, 1989). However, our case study of professor responses to student journals in content area reading suggests that the conversation is often asymmetrical (Tannen, 1990). In each of these three journal responses, the professor established the high ground by making terse general comments about teaching and texts. Despite the private curriculum established in dialogue journal communication, the professor's responses remained relatively impersonal.

The frequency counts in Table 1 show that the professor responded to the three case study students by extending their thoughts, complimenting them, and acknowledging their skills and talents. He did little to reveal his own struggle to become a teacher by discussing his own institutional biography (Britzman, 1991). In essence, the journals consisted of student entries and professor feedback, as opposed to establishing a forum for equal parties to engage in meaningful and reciprocal dialogue.

Tannen's construct of symmetrical and asymmetrical conversations served as a useful interpretive theory for examining these professor-student dialogues. Although students' journal entries might have encouraged greater commentary on the professor's early struggles in teaching, he approached dialogue journal writing with a pre-established schema for responding. Namely, as the professor, he orchestrated and in many ways controlled the course content. The majority of journal exchanges, therefore, echo the unequal status of professor and student roles.

Implications from this case study analysis have changed the way in which more recent dialogue journal conversations have progressed. With a conscious awareness of the potential for asymmetrical conversations comes greater care and time in responding to student's journal entries. The tone of professor responses has become more conversational and encourages open discussion of the fears and self doubt that accompany entry into a content area reading practicum. For example, the professor now discusses his own learning and research, visits to schools, lessons that went well or poorly,

and personal anecdotes about becoming a content teacher.

At the heart of the issue of symmetrical and asymmetrical dialogues is the realization that something as simple as carrying on a dialogue journal with students is far more complex than it first appears. The use of dialogue journals should not be undertaken lightly. Rather, dialogue journal implementation must be grounded in an understanding that communication about classroom teaching involves risk, self doubt, and ultimately a desire to bridge traditional professor-student roles.

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Table 1

Content Area Reading Professor's Responses To Student Journal Entries

	Extending Thoughts	Answering Questions	Acknowledging Skills
Iwalani	3	0	0
Marge	3	4	3
Carolyn	1	0	1